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ABSTRACT

Noting that theatre for young people in Europe is much more aggressive in seeking to influence the attitudes and ideas of audiences than that of the United States, this paper examines the political and social trends occurring in children's theatre in four European countries. Following an introduction to this trend toward "educational theatre," the paper discusses the theatre companies, the range of plays performed, and the social issues portrayed in England, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Finland. The paper concludes that these political/social trends in theatre for children tend to be stronger in countries where there is political unrest, such as Portugal and Spain. (HTH)

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WANDERINGS IN WESTERN EUROPE

Harold R. Oaks

Theatre For Young Audiences Around The World: Aesthetic And Political Trends

CTAA Convention, Dallas, Texas, August 11, 1981

As a distinct art form, theatre for young audiences is comparatively young. In the United States it has been used almost exclusively as an entertainment medium with some lip service paid to "educational values." The programming revolution brought to television by "Sesame Street" has propelled that medium well beyond most American children's theatre in both educational and social areas. Powerful and effective television programming has appeared dealing with social issues ranging from divorce and drug abuse to child pornography. The networks have found sponsors and an audience for these topics through excellent writing and quality treatment. But even television appears hesitant to present political material in dramatic for the young audience.

In several European countries theatre for young audiences is much more aggressive in seeking to influence the attitudes and ideas of the audience than we are in the United States. For example, in an address to the ASSITEJ General Assembly on Tuesday, June 16, 1981, the delegate from Portugal suggested theatre needs to be "subversive"--an instrument to "liberate the child to the new social order...." If we merely integrate the child into current society we are "charlatans who are instruments of the seat of power." Theatre should not be a "sugar coat on a pill of education...." It must be larger than that. We should "take a stand," not just be "playing at" theatre, passing time, decorating the stage.

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These remarks were greeted by long and loud applause from many of the delegates, and were reinforced by interviews with delegates from several Western European countries. The "art" of theatre was frequently attacked in discussions, both public and private, and several demanded "art" be eliminated in favor of "message." Traditional "fairy tale theatre" is in disrepute and was frequently used as the negative example in exploring what we should be doing in the field.

The implications of this movement are best demonstrated by viewing some specific examples from individual countries. I have selected England, The Netherlands, Denmark and Finland.

ENGLAND

To some extent, England has set the pattern for several other countries in their approach to theatre for young people. There are traditional "pantomimes" each Christmas holiday season given by almost all regional theatres and by the West End Theatre in London. This is a "family" theatre experience, elegantly staged and costumed, based on traditional fairy tales (Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella was developed as an English pantomime).

Brian Way is credited with pioneering the Young People's Theatre movement by establishing the Theatre Center, as a reaction to the "pantomime" theatre's "superficial" level, attempting to be more imaginative, educational and friendly, and setting out to work where it was more accessible to and comfortable for young people: in schools. Twenty-nine years later this represents a major force in English theatre for young people. David Johnston, current director of the Theatre Center, in a paper presented at the Lyons ASSITEJ Congress discussed the origins of the T.I.E. movement, its relationship to

Young People's Theatre, and the political direction of the work:

It was no surprise, therefore, that the young idealists who started the T.I.E. movement in Great Britain, in Coventry and elsewhere, anxious as they were to involve young people in socio-political thought, issues directly relevant to the formal curriculum and to young people's lives rather than escapist fantasy, should choose to work in schools rather than theatres....A Y.P.T. company like Theatre Center has increasingly seen the social and educational value of presenting plays on specific themes such as Ecology, Prejudice, and Third World; and T.I.E. companies have come to see the value of the 'performance' element in programmes being extended relative to the drama-teaching, discussion, decision-making element, so the labels "T.I.E." and "Y.P.T." have become blurred and the "Theatre in Schools" movement has matured!

. . .

If I give the impression of highly motivated political activists infiltrating schools in order to subvert the curriculum and the pupils, I do not think I would be representing the Theatre in Schools movement at all correctly. The teaching profession in Great Britain, particularly at the administrative level, is far too conservative to allow that form of development. Head teachers have considerable power in their schools, and can easily refuse to allow any theatre group into their schools....but....I <u>am</u> interested in the political impact of Young People's Theatre work; I do see the art form as one which can supply information, ideas and alternatives to those perpetuated by the British establishment. We are not in schools to indoctrinate; we are certainly there to offer young people alternative information which may help them draw their own conclusions. In my opinion, the body of progressive YPT/TIE groups in Great Britain have no time for the attitude that 'art for art's sake' can exist, that 'pure' entertainment should be the basis of Young People's Theatre. For me the clearest statement of political allegiance is that statement which declares that the artist should <u>not</u> present work with political overtones. Such opinions in our country are usually presented by those who ignore the plethora of (establishment-biased) political information which daily infiltrates the lives of young people. I believe that theatre is a medium of communication and as such most communicate ideas, thoughts about <u>a real world</u> and cannot afford to be an escapist fantasy, a diversion from twentieth century reality. The <u>Times Educational Supplement</u> recently wrote of Theatre Center's work:

> In 1964 the emphasis was on the qualities which go to make good theatre. There is certainly still that, but this time 'enterprises of great pith and moment' which Brian Way's 'Hamlet' might have articulated as beautiful verse, are now presented as raw issues to confront. Sadly, that's the world the children of the 1980's will have to live in.[1]

David Johnston has articulately described the position taken by the TIE/YPT companies. They want current issues and change. Other interviewees used the word "radical" to describe some of the TIE companies and the heavily Marxist political views represented in their productions. Therefore, England has both a well established "traditional" theatre offering primarily folk tale material, and a second generation activist theatre seeking social and political change.[2]

THE NETHERLANDS

This small country has some thirty-six theatre companies playing for children and youth. Only five or six are subsidized, the rest must survive on earned income. About fifty percent deal primarily with political/social subjects while the rest present more traditional material or contemporary problems.

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[1]David Johnston, "School, a Place for Performance?" mimeograph manuscript of address to ASSITEJ Congress, Lyons, France, 18 June 1981, pp. 3-4.

[2]John English, interview conducted at ASSITEJ Congress, Lyons, France, 16 June 1981.

Some titles and plots will illustrate the range of theatre played for children in the Netherlands: winner of the Hans Snoek Prijs for 1981, the theatre cooperative Mevrouw Smit has a play for eight-to-twelve-year-olds titled Wat Heeft ie toch, wat Heeft ie toch? ("What do ya have, what do ya have?").

> This is a story about a family--father, mother, two children--where one of the children is not loved as much as the other.
>
> There are events such as power struggles between parents and children, aggression, making friends, feeling of guilt, and school experiences.[3]

A second company, Maccus, stages a show titled Niks te doen ("Nothing to Do"). It deals with a major current problem in the Netherlands and Germany: empty apartment buildings in the face of a housing shortage.

> What do you do when you have nothing to do? Sjonnie and Paulien think of everything, but nothing is fun, and the fun things are not permitted. Then they discover the empty house. That becomes their place.
>
> The adults find it too dangerous and the city boards the house up. But the children don't give up their playhouse so easily.[4]

A third group, Marmouzet, describe their goal in doing theatre for young audiences as bringing:

> ...traditional theatre to the child so he will feel as comfortable about theatre as he does with a school or a swimming pool. The primary purpose is the pleasure of the children in believing through theatre.[5]

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[3]Stitchting Wilkor, Kindertheatre 80/81 (The Hague: Stitchting Wilkor and the Werkverband von Provinciale Serviceburo's, 1980), p. 11, translated by H. Oaks.

[4]Wilkor, p. 13.

[5]Wilkor, p. 8.

Yet another group, De Speeldoos, in the play Klaren Maken de Fantasie ("Clothes Make the Fantasy"), has three persons in a number of scenes demonstrate how wearing different costumes makes one see and speak differently. At the end of the piece, the five-to-ten-year-olds may vote on who played the best.[6]

Clearly, there is a full range of offerings, from social problems through sheer entertainment. The artistic level varies, but the description of the work of the Mevrouw Smit company in the report of the Hans Snoek Prijs Awards Jury leads one to believe they do excellent work.[7] Overall, the quality of production of the fifty-one puppet companies is superior to the work of the theatre companies, I am told.[8] There is no fully staged children's theatre (like the pantomimes in England) since none of the children's companies have permanent theatres, and the adult companies do no plays for children.

DENMARK

This country represents the kind of political division that can come from a basic difference in ideological approach. I picked up booklets from two Danish Centers for ASSITEJ--each describing its part of Danish Theatre for children and ignoring the other. The more traditional group was seated and the other group was removed from its display booth under protest at the outset of the Congress. This subgroup represents thirty-two theatres, most of them

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[6]Wilkor, p. 9.

[7]Juryrapport Hans Snoek Prijs 1981 (Amsterdam: Vereniging Schouwburg en Concertgebouw Directies in Nederland), p. 3.

[8]Hans Snoek, interview conducted at ASSITEJ Congress, Lyons, France, 14 June 1981.

collectives with strong political and social views. Excerpts from their publication establish their position:

> The Working Class Movement and artist of the Theatre came together and made a Theatre for Schoolchildren (Dansk Skolescene) which revolved around the idea that all children irrespective of "Class," had the opportunity to get to know Classical Theatre art, not just being read and "explained" in a school lesson but actually experienced on a stage....
>
> Due to the influence of the Student-Worker Uprising of 1968, thoughts of the re-evaluation of the Task of Art in Society gained a foothold in theatre circles, and the ground-principles of the state institution (Dansk Skolescene) were brought up to examination. After a political and ideological strife the institution was abolished.
>
> Thus public money, set aside for the Theatre for Children, was released and educationally and politically engaged actors stood at the ready to make children's theatre, the aims of which were not to bring up children to be good Theatre-goers like adults but, on the contrary, aimed at making theatre around the children's own reality and based upon the children's own conditions. This in essence means that one no longer presented plays where the 'Good Fairy' arrives at the end and solves all problems with her 'Magic Wand' but plays which show that humans who create problems for one another must of necessity solve them together.
>
> These actors were no longer content to play theatre in the huge buildings meant originally for adults. They built Theatres meant for children...and they were no longer content with playing in a 'Stationary' Theatre. The theatre experience should be something open to all no matter from which social strata or which regional area they come from:...theatre groups began to tour.[9]

Five theatres are represented by the other organization and some of their work is also topical. Parkteatret last year, for example, did a German play on the problems of technology, a series of British plays on electricity and magnetism, and a Canadian musical. Another of the companies, Fontana Studio, staged a Puppet Ballet to the music of Debussy and is doing an adaptation of Anatole France's Jester of God.

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[9]Arne Skovhus, "Children's Theatre in Denmark" (Frederiksborggade 20, 1360 Copenhagen, Denmark: The Danish Centre for ASSITEJ, 1981), as Afterword.

The trend in Denmark is toward contemporary material, much of it with socio-political overtones, but some traditional work continues.

FINLAND

An examination of theatre for children in Finland may help to understand the development in the whole of the Nordic region, although each country has unique qualities. As in England, the established theatres produce "Christmas Plays" intended for a family audience, and this constituted the offering for the younger audience until the 1960's. The political and social activism of this period, brought on partly by mass audience television, spawned a situation where "spontaneous self-expression, natural play, running wild, directed improvisation, etc., could equally well be classified as creative activity or as children's theatre." Something needed to be done.

> In this rather chaotic situation some of the young people in the theatre became interested in children's theatre. Alongside the school theatre (Skolteatern), a Swedish language theatre which had been running for ten years, they started up four new children's theatre groups at the beginning of the seventies: AHAA-teatteri, Penniteatteri, Tilateatteri and the puppet theatre Vihrea Omena.[10]

These new groups rejected the traditional plays of the Finnish writer Topelius[11] and with him the traditional fairytale. They moved to establish a

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[10]Marja Kurkela, Children's Theatre in Finland from the Sixties to the Eighties--Views and Experiences (Helsinki: The Finnish ASSITEJ Centre, 1981), p. 2.

[11]Sakari Topelius, Finnish journalist and critic, wrote altogether twenty-seven children's plays in the 1850's and 1860's. Most of them are based on folk tales, some Finnish, some that had reached Finland from elsewhere. But it is noteworthy that besides the classic tales, Topelius also wrote adventure plays set in the everyday world of the schoolchildren of his day. (See Kurkela, p. 3.)

pattern more directly in contact with the child's world and similar to what other countries had. This contact with other countries came at the first Scandinavian meeting for children's theatre held in Denmark in 1970.

> In Sweden there were already several touring children's theatre groups, and in addition, the biggest established theatres in the country were just beginning to produce children's theatre following the example of the groups. Thus Swedish experience and views carried considerable weight at the seminar and had a powerful influence on practice in Finland following the seminar.[12]

The declaration from the 1970 conference also carried objectives:

> 1. It is the duty of the society to ensure that all children have access to the theatre regardless of geographical, economic and social circumstances. Every limitation of sanction aimed at the content, form or making public of children's theatre has led and leads to a limitation of freedom of expression and thus reinforces discrimination against the child in society.
>
> 2. We do not wish to bring up new consumers for the theatre.
>
> 3. We see the theatre and the child's own creative theatre activities as instruments to develop the child's imagination and awareness. The theatre must not present prevailing conditions as self-evident."[13]

The new companies returned from the congress determined to implement the objectives in Finland.

> Young theatre people began to produce political theatre varying in form from cabaret to social reportage, kitchen-sink realism to historical spectacle, etc....Because fairytales were considered to obscure the child's picture of reality, princesses, witches and fairies were sentenced to be banished completely from children's culture, like the distaff from the kingdom of Sleeping Beauty.
>
> In the new educational children's plays, real problems were dealt with instead of the marriage cares of princesses:

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[12]Kurkela, p. 4.

[13]Kurkela, p. 4.

> the automobile cult, pollution of the environment, the dangers of sweets, alcohol, drugs and tobacco, conditions in developing countries, etc. It was typical of these plays, no matter what the subject, that they presented one problem and its solution.
>
> If some of the one-problem plays were a bit wooden, operating on one level, and often as black and white in their composition as Topelius' plays were, there were also a number of fresh and inventive productions.[14]

As the decade advanced, the complexity of social and political problems became apparent and the demand for a richer theatre also developed. There was a yearning for the individual point of view, for total characterization. Partly by exchange with East European countries, it was realized that the portraying of social reality in Finland in art had been very narrow and stereotyped.

> Children's theatre was especially influenced by the translating of children's books and works of education. When the vital benefit derived from the classic [sic] and from folk tales by East European culture was seen, theatre people in Finland discovered anew their own folk tradition and realized the scope offered to children's theatre by fairy tales, stories, poems and nursery rhymes. It was recognized that through fairy tales social reality could be described more richly than by directly educative plays.
>
> Partly due to the same influences, aesthetic education began to be spoken of in theatre education....
>
> Furthermore, when the possibility of using the folk tradition as a means of teaching internationalism and as a counter to the super-national 'trash' culture was realized, the playing of folk tales from the mid-seventies onwards became for several years a new mainline in Finnish children's theatre.[15]

With this movement...

> Certain deep-rooted ideas about children's theatre were evaluated anew; among them the 'on the child's

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[14]Kurkela, pp. 5-6.

[15]Kurkela, p. 8.

> terms' principle was found hollow, rigid demands for age grouping mechanical, and 'brush-your-teeth' plays [and] one-problem plays, over-simplified.[16]

Even though the artistic elements were stressed more, children's theatre was still seen as "a second-class art, if it was art at all."[17] Jussi Helminen, writer for children and theatre director, described the problem in educational and attitudinal terms.

> The children's physician is a specialist physician. Before he can specialize he must be a general practitioner. One can only handle children's theatre when one can handle theatre in general. Let the staging of plays by Shakespeare or Brecht be the normal challenge for those concerned with children's theatre, let the staging of children's plays be their special challenge...[18]

He called for an elimination of performances that talked down to the child, that were dishonest or "childish." He found hope in "...the fact that the training centre of the Finnish Theatre Academy arranged a week-long supplementary training course on children's theatre.[19] An articulate reflection of this view came in the 1979 Year of the Child seminars which reached the conclusion that

> ...good children's theatre is good theatre--though not all good theatre is good children's theatre. This view also contains the idea that no age grouping is required for plays except the lowest age limit--or in fact the idea of family theatre.[20]

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[16]Kurkela, p. 9.

[17]Kurkela, p. 12.

[18]Kurkela, p. 12.

[19]Kurkela, p. 13.

[20]Kurkela, p. 13.

There are now in Finland four CT companies and three puppet companies, all touring and without home theatres. Most of their income (sixty percent) is earned and the forty percent subsidy amounts to about seven Marks per child spectator compared with 150 Marks per adult spectator appropriated for opera. Two puppet and two children's theatre companies hope to have regular stages in the next few years. The material performed varies. This year, for example, one company will be doing one contemporary piece, one classic or fairy tale, and one story from the 1950's.[21]

CONCLUSION

There are major political/social trends in much of the theatre for children in Western Europe. These tend to be stronger where there is political unrest, as in Portugal and Spain, for example. The theatres tend to be school oriented, often subsidized by dedication of the collective company which develops its own material and tours all year. All of the West European countries I have contacted have this type of theatre-in-education. Most also have some companies performing traditional fairy tale productions, fully staged during selected seasons of the year. West Germany and Sweden, for example, have some commercial theatres doing fairy tales to large audiences, primarily to make money.

There is a great need in the United States for a conference on Political and Aesthetic trends in American Theatre for Children. It would be helpful for us as a profession to discuss our views and objectives.

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[21]Nena Stenius, interview conducted at ASSITEJ Congress, Lyons, France, 15 June 1981.

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